Urban Protest and Informal Democracy in Venezuela

Alejandro Velasco (NYU) - Venezuela today is a country mired in turmoil. But thirty years ago the story was different. Back then Venezuela stood for many as an inclusive democracy in a region where dictatorship and civil war reigned. Enlightened leaders, strong parties, powerful unions – all spoke of a stable political system that for decades managed to ensure social peace. Or so it seemed. As historian Alejandro Velasco argues, the conflicts that grip Venezuela today aren’t a departure from but a continuation of decades-long struggles over what kind of democracy would emerge after the country’s last military dictatorship fell in 1958. These struggles played out dramatically in the 23 de enero (January 23rd) neighborhood, a massive complex of squatter settlements and public housing high-rises in the heart of Venezuela’s capital Caracas. Named in honor of democracy’s founding date, the neighborhood’s history mirrors the nation’s democratic history – unruly, contentious, and rife with battles to secure a political system more responsive to the needs of the nation’s growing ranks of urban popular sectors. These battles took place in the streets and in the polls, as residents made use of both institutional and extra-institutional democratic tools to demand accountability from political leaders. More than offering a story about Caracas or Venezuela, Velasco engages larger questions about the relationship between formal and informal politics in Latin America, questions that strike at the heart of debates over what democracy is – and what it should be – in highly unequal societies.

Alejandro Velasco (NYU) is a historian of modern Latin America whose research and teaching interests are in the areas of social movements, urban culture and democratization. His book, Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela (University of California Press, 2015), couples archival and ethnographic research to examine how residents of Venezuela’s largest public housing community pursued full citizenship during the heyday of Latin America’s once-model democracy.